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ABSTRACT

With the rapid and dramatic influx of Asians of widely varying background to the United States, more comprehensive planning for literacy education will be increasingly important. Most research on literacy in English as a second language, particularly on transfer of learning from one language to another, focuses on groups with European language backgrounds. There is evidence that the very different orthography and syntax of Asian languages may be accompanied by or account for very different cognitive and learning processes. Implications for educators are: (1) they must be judicious in applying current bilingual pedagogical approaches to literacy skills development; (2) they should focus on the orthographic and syntactic differences between Asian languages and English while considering the universal aspects of the reading process; and (3) they need to keep in perspective the relative importance of different skills for classroom emphasis. Every effort should be made to develop primary language literacy, at least by making the primary language a visible and legitimate part of schoolwork. Development of reading and writing skills should be approached as part of the communication process, with adjustments to accommodate cultural differences and their effects on reading comprehension. (MSE)

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LITERACY SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND THE ASIAN LEP STUDENTS

A Paper Presented
by
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Limited English-proficient students from Asian language backgrounds have grown steadily since the 1960s. However, the dramatic increase in this student population has become evident only with the 1980 census. Whereas in the 60's and early 70's the most visible group was Chinese-speaking, later influxes such as Southeast Asian refugees and large numbers of Koreans have contributed to great diversity within this population. In many schools today, it is not uncommon to find limited English-proficient students who are speakers of Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Pilipino, Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong and Kymer. Some of these students have extensive schooling, while others have no school experiences before entering the United States. Whereas some of the students come from societies with a long literate tradition, others come from societies with only recent experience with the written language.

From most projections, the number of LEP (Limited English Proficient) students from Asian language backgrounds will continue to grow in the decades to come. In California, where over forty percent of the Asian population in the U.S. resides, the Asian LEP students are now approximately twenty-five percent of the total LEP student population. According to the California State Department of Education census for 1985, there were more than 107,000 Asian LEP students in California schools. Given the trend for the continued influx of Asian LEP students, more comprehensive

planning for instruction will be necessary to enhance school achievement for this diverse and growing population.

In order for students to achieve in schools and subsequently function in society, they need to develop a high level of literacy skills. Translated into an educational setting, this would mean the development of both reading and writing skills. For students whose primary language is other than English, their school performance will eventually depend on their success in developing an adequate level of reading and writing skills in English.

Although it has been commonly agreed that research data related to the development of literacy in a second language provide a sound basis for the development of an appropriate pedagogy for instruction, most available research data address mainly second-language learners from European language backgrounds. While there are universal aspects of second-language acquisition and literacy development that can be generalized for learners of all language backgrounds, it is possible that learners from languages with very different syntactic structures and orthography from European languages may experience more success with different pedagogical approaches to their English literacy development.

Specifically, in the area of the development of reading skills, research studies (Modiano, 1968, and Lambert, 1972) have indicated that reading skills developed in one language can be transferred to another language and that reading skills can be better developed through the primary language. However,

the languages involved in the transfer of skills in these studies are all alphabetic languages.

A study involving Persian and English showed that Persian students in bilingual schools do not read as well in Persian or English compared to their peers in monolingual Persian or English schools (Cowan, 1976). Cowan attributed this lower achievement to the need for two different sets of strategies for English and Persian that have very different orthographies and syntactic structures. Barnitz also pointed out that in reading in a second language, the orthography and syntactic structures of the first language may be variables to consider in the development of reading skills in the second language (Barnitz, 1982). A study by Akiyama also indicated that the order of acquisition of specific language structures might not be universal as indicated by previous research. The study with Japanese-speaking subjects showed that the order acquisition of a structure might be influenced by the specific language itself (Akiyama, 1984). Saville-Troike found in her study that the ability to produce relatively accurate structures in English is related more to whether the learner's first language is a European language (Saville-Troike, 1984).

In addition, there are studies which indicated that, in reading, different orthography might be processed differently. At least two studies have shown that Chinese subjects experienced more Stroop interference with words wirtten in Chinese, indicating the possibility that writing systems that are ideographic, such as Chinese, might be processed by a

different part of the brain than phonemic systems such as English (Chao, et al., 1979). Studies of the reading ability of Japanese patients with different brain injuries found that patients were impaired in their ability to read Japanese written in Kana (a phonemic writing system) or Kanji (Chinese characters, an ideographic writing system), depending on the location of the injury, again confirming the possibility that different orthographies might be processed differently (Sasanuma, 1974).

Given the research studies mentioned above, it is reasonable to conclude that educators need to be judicious in applying present bilingual pedagogical approaches to literacy skills development in a second language such as English. It is necessary to be aware that the bases of such pedagogy have been reserach studies on learners whose primary language is another alphabetic language or a European language with syntactic structures that are more consistent with those found in the English language. Such caution is particularly important if the reason for selecting these approaches is based on the notion that reading skills developed in one language can be readily transferred to a second language.

In addressing the instructional needs for literacy development in Asian LEP students, educators should keep in mind the diversity of languages with different writing systems and syntactic structures involved. Chinese, Vietnamese, Hmong and Lao are all tonal languages in which the change in tone brings about a complete change in meaning. For example, in

Chinese the sound 'ma' in four different tones could mean 'horse', 'mother', 'hemp' or 'to scold'. Such dramatic change in meaning with tonal changes rarely occurs in English. In the same four languages, tense and plurality are not indicated through the use of inflection as in English, but through the use of time words and measure words placed in a specific order within a sentence. Such syntactic structure differences can be observed in the omission of tense inflections such as 'ed' and plural inflections such as 's' in the English production of Chinese, Vietnamese, Hmong and Lao speakers.

In addition, there is also great diversity in the writing systems of many of the Asian languages of our LEP students. The Chinese writing system is ideographic, where the written symbols do not necessaarily represent the sounds of the language. Therefore, it is not always possible to assign the pronunciation of the characters through their graphic representation. The Japanese writing system utilizes two sets of symbols: Kanji, which is ideographic, and Kana, which is a set of symbols, each representing a syllable. The Korean writing system also utilizes a set of symbols which represents different syllables. None of the three orthographies mentioned resembles the Roman alphabet commonly used in European languages. Lao, which is an alphabetic language, has its own distinct alphabet with a system of its own for marking tones. Of the three Asian languages that utilize the Roman alphabet, Hmong, Vietnamese and Pilipino, the first two are also accompanied by tone marks. Given these differences in

orthography, syntactic structures and even basic language orientation such as the indicators of tense and plurality, the concept of literacy skills transfer needs to be applied with more differentiation. For Asian LEP students, more attention needs to be given to which of the literacy skills in the primary language are readily transferrable to English and which require specific instruction.

By focusing on the orthographic and syntactic differences between Asian languages and English, educators can better plan for literacy skills instruction to determine which specific skills require additional emphasis in instruction and which skills can be reasonably assumed to be universal in nature, and thus transferrable regardless of languages involved. It is also important to keep in perspective the relative importance of different skills in the development of literacy. While attention to linguisitc and orthographic features is important to the decoding of words, higher level literacy skills are necessary for reading comprehension. A recent study has found that beginning ESL students in junior high school were more attentive to the graphemic features of print in reading English as compared to more advanced students and to native English speakers (Bean, et at., 1981). Bean pointed out that by approaching reading through an over-attention to print, the beginning ESL students might be attempting to reading at a level that could impede comprehension. Bean suggested that the approach utilized by these students might be the result of the instructional

approach used by the teachers that over-emphasized graphic accuracy, thus sending a misleading message about the reading process and the strategies necessary for reading comprehension to the students. Carrell studied native English readers and ESL readers in their use of background knowledge in reading comprehension in English. She found that, unlike native speakers, even advanced ESL readers did not appear to use context or prior knowledge of content to facilitate English text comprehension. The ESL readers tended to be linguistically bound to a text. While it cannot be inferred that such strategies used by ESL readers in English reading were the result of misleading reading instruction, it is still important to emphasize that ESL reading pedagogy needs to give adequate attention to reading comprehension strategies that are other than those that are linguistically bound even before the learner has developed a high level of English proficiency. Such an approach would be important for those students who have already developed or are developing literacy skills through their primary language, as well as for those students without the opportunity for such development.

In addition to consideration for the differences in orthography and syntactic structures for Asian languages, it is also important to focus on the universal aspects of the reading process. Research studies on subjects reading Chinese characters found evidence of phonetic recoding which indicated that even with a non-phonemic writing system such as Chinese, speech recoding as a strategy is still used for human

information processing (Tseng, et al., 1977). Another study on Chinese intermediate-grade students found that, similar to readers in a phonemic language, the subjects still depend on their oral repertoire in their reading process (Chu-Chang, 1979). Another study on kindergarteners who were instructed in the meaning of a set of Chinese characters found that the children developed certain reading readiness skills considered important in learning to read significantly better than children who were instructed through English reading readiness skills development (Jew, 1981). Children in the study were observed applying strategies learned for recognizing Chinese characters in comparable tasks in English. These studies indicated that even languages with very different orthographies share certain universal aspects of language processing. Further, certain initial-level literacy skills are transferrable even between languages with dissimilar orthographies. The findings from these studies essentially confirm the findings of William Gray that proficient readers of fourteen very different languages utilize very similar strategies (Gray, 1969).

Current research supports Goodman's claim that reading is a meaning-driven activity and that proficient readers predict or hypothesize and then confirm the information while reading (Goodman, 1970). Rumelhart also suggested that reading is an interactive process between the reader's prior knowledge and the structure and content of the reading material (Rumelhart, 1977). Readers bring to a text their range of

background experiences with language which they use to construct a meaningful representation of the text (Spiro, 1980). The organized clusters of the reader's prior knowledge or schemata provide the context for comprehension.

Given the current theoretical framework on the process of reading, it appears that proficiency in reading comprehension developed in any language can provide a sound basis for the development of reading proficiency in a second language, in spite of orthographic or syntactic differences. It also appears that the reader's prior cultural, linguistic and knowledge background can greatly affect the reader's ability to comprehend text. A proficient reader, therefore, is effective in her strategies to use her background knowledge for reading comprehension. Within the context of a LEP student's development of proficiency in reading, it can be safely assumed that the student can develop better strategies for using prior knowledge for comprehension if the reading material is consistent with the linguistic, cultural and knowledge background of the student. Thus programs serving Asian LEP students should consider the development of literacy skills through the primary language whenever resources are available.

It is commonly known that the lack of instructional material, instructional personnel or student concentration often make a comprehensive program of primary language literacy development for Asian LEP students not feasible. However, within these constraints, educators should make every effort possible to provide such development and experiences in primary

language literacy. Where resources are adequate, a comprehensive primary language literacy development program should be provided in addition to a program of English literacy which articulates the literacy skills developed through two languages. In situations where instructional materials are lacking, a language experience approach adapted for the specific language can be used to provide repeated experience in primary language literacy to enhance the student's experience in using prior knowledge and personal experience with language in strategies for reading comprehension. At a minimum, efforts should be made to label student drawings and classroom experiences with the primary language, particularly in school work that students would bring home. By making the primary language visible and a legitimate part of school work, educators can empower the family and the community to play a more active role in the schooling of their children. Without such visible evidences of the role of the home language, parents new to an alien culture and language may feel a sense of powerlessness in contributing to the education of their children. Even with parents who are not literate in their primary language, the tradition of peer teaching of literacy and the communal sharing of responsibility for tutoring among many Asian immigrant groups will at least allow the parents to contribute to the education of their children through their efforts of identifying and arranging for people in the community to help their children through the primary language. In addition, educators should consider the use of a native

speaker who can provide listening experiences to further develop students' comprehension skills that are necessary for different levels of comprehension to enhance the students' ultimate development of adequate literacy skills in English.

For English literacy development, educators need to approach the development of reading and writing skills as a part of the communication process. Hudelson found that ESL students were able to comprehend written English words in the environments that are important to them before the formal introduction of literacy skills in English. She also found that these students were able to express themselves initially in written English by inventing writing conventions which gradually conform to the rules of the English writing system (Hudelson, 1984). By providing students with experiences in communicating through writing in English through a prewriting and revision process, literacy skills in English can be efficiently developed. It is also important that an approach to ESL reading which balances the emphasis on the graphemic and linguistic features with an emphasis on utilizing prior experience and knowledge in reading comprehension be planned and implemented. Instructional strategies which help provide background knowledge to text prior to reading can also be employed. Subsequent discussion of English text to further comprehension was found to be more effective through the primary language. Thus, it can be included as a part of the overall instructional approach whenever feasible. Consistent efforts in planning to augment for the cultural background

differences and their effect on comprehension in a second language should also be part of the overall English reading instruction (Andersson, et al., 1984).

In conclusion, much more effort in research, pedagogical development and instructional resources development is necessary to provide quality literacy development for Asian LEP students. However, the appropriate instructional planning cannot wait until the data and resourcess are developed. The author's attempt is merely one of providing information on currently available research data and reasonable suggestions for implementation to educators with responsibilities for the instruction of Asian LEP students.

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